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AUTHOR Bates, A. W.
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ABSTRACT

This lecture discusses factors that would be involved if the British Open University's distance education program were to be extended to Western Europe through the use of satellite transmissions. The cost benefits of such a move are discussed, including the possibility of additional funding through the European Commission. Another factor considered is the current movement of other agencies, primarily multinational corporations, into the European market. Reasons for not expanding into Europe are also presented, including the problems inherent in cultural and language barriers, and difficulties that would be encountered in providing adequate local support administrative services. The possibility of competing with already established European distance education programs is also considered. In conclusion, it is suggested that cooperation with existing European agencies would be the best alternative, one which would keep costs down, provide necessary local support, and avoid difficulties in intercultural communication. (EW)

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THE OPEN UNIVERSITY

Development of Activities in Europe

Professor A W Bates, B.A., Ph.D.

Professor of Educational Media Research
in the Institute of Educational Technology at the Open University

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The text of an lecture delivered at the Residential Meeting of the Council of the Open University

26 September 1987

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Introduction

I come to this meeting after a salutary, but not unusual, experience. Having spent 18 months researching into the potential of satellites for education in Europe, I attended a meeting on Wednesday where it was decided that despite the many possibilities, the Open University would at most take only one hour a month on the Olympus European satellite, for 'shop-window purposes', despite the European Space Agency offering free coverage of 60% of Western Europe, and the possibility of exciting new communication modes. The reason for this decision is quite simple: we lack a policy for what the OU is to do in Europe; without such a policy, we have no rationale for using a European satellite facility, and no means to provide the infrastructure necessary to support such a service.

I intend to be deliberately provocative in this session, to stimulate discussion on the subject, because I feel as someone concerned with the application of technology to the Open University's activities somewhat in a policy limbo. While we need to harness technology to the needs of education, there are also 'windows of opportunities' which remain open for a relatively brief period of time. We do therefore need not only to resolve but also to implement policy regarding Europe quite urgently.

Why should we go into Europe?

Well, I thought we were already a part of Europe. We are all Europeans now, and we would be doing no more than recognising the major political and economic movement in Western Europe in the second half of this century, the move to a single, European social, political and economic entity. You will

see from the long list of activities on the sheet prepared by the Planning Office that we are in fact already extensively involved in activities related to continental Europe; indeed one would have to be quite perverse not to be involved. Nevertheless, none of these items reflects the core activity of the University. We do not yet offer undergraduate courses to anyone in continental Europe who wants our courses, and joint research with other European institutions is a minor part of our research activities. What we have then is a series of un-cordinated, entrepreneurial initiatives around the edges, but no clear long-term aims or goals.

Perhaps the main argument for a more substantial expansion of our teaching activities into continental Europe would be the cost-benefits of so doing. Our courses cost a great deal to design, but relatively little to present, most of the presentation costs being covered by the student fee. Given the high cost of design and production, there is great potential benefit in the design and production costs being shared with other institutions who would also use the materials. Furthermore, there are 21 million English speaking people in continental Europe, therefore increasing the market for existing courses by almost 50%. Indeed, it could be argued that if our courses were made available only for associate students in continental Europe (other than for special schemes) we would make a substantial profit on each student enrolled.

Another important point is that the technological infra-structure needed to support 'long-distance' education is already in place, and the European Commission is ensuring that communication for distance education and training will be considerably enhanced in the next few years. It is anticipated that within 10 years, 46% of all Western European homes will have access to satellite programming, with the UK as the market leader. The European

Space Agency is offering free time for education on OLYMPUS from 1989. However, there are already satellites in place which can offer a similar service for relatively low cost, on a commercial basis, for in-company or college-based education and training. It is now already possibly to communicate electronically with any Western European university, through computer networks such as EUROCOM or EARN. The Open University, with the installation of a user-friendly computer communication system for students, is well placed to provide computer communications for students anywhere in Europe, including electronic delivery of texts. Neither technology nor even cost is a barrier now to communicating with students in continental Europe. The University has also at last tackled the major obstacle of rights clearance for video material in the rest of Europe. If then we want to communicate with students elsewhere in Europe, we can, and at relatively little extra cost than with our UK-based students.

Another major reason for widening our European activities is the access it will give us to the very substantial funds available from the European Commission for research and joint course development. Money for research into the application of technology to distance education is so scarce from British sources, and so tied to projects that do not necessarily meet the needs of the Open University, that I personally have stopped looking; but the European Commission, through projects such as ESPRIT, COMETT and above all DELTA, is making millions of pounds available in areas of direct relevance to distance education and training. Furthermore, my experience is that the European Commission recognises the importance of the Open University, and it is much more flexible and speedy with its funding than the British research funding agencies. The catch is

that the money must usually be used for European-wide applications, or be conducted with another European partner, and I wonder how long we will be considered a suitable recipient of such funding if we remain otherwise aloof from the rest of Europe.

Another pressure for greater European involvement is the consequence of *not* doing so. Nature abhors a vacuum, and if we don't fill it others will. PACE is a consortium of European multi-national companies which is about to provide in-company advanced engineering training throughout Europe, by distance teaching methods. It will selectively recruit the most advanced researchers from various universities and companies to teach courses via satellite and computer networking, and begins next year. While individual staff from the OU may provide some of the lecture material, the OU will have no control over or formal relationship with PACE. Other agencies, such as the American National Technological University, are expected to move into the European scene, offering American qualifications in engineering for its satellite-delivered courses. These programmes will not end at the cliffs of Dover of course, but will come down into the very same sitting-rooms of our own students.

Why we should NOT go into Europe

Against this, a number of reasons can be put forward for not going into continental Europe with our core activities. Perhaps the most compelling, and certainly the one I have most sympathy for, is that we are not able to meet the demand from UK citizens, never mind the French or Germans. While we have an artificially constrained limit on our undergraduate students, it does not make sense to expand into Europe. On the other hand, if we

were to expand our courses into other European countries, and by so doing could demonstrate no net extra costs, this would provide a strong argument for greater expansion of UK students.

What about the language and cultural barriers? These too must be recognised. I am less concerned initially about language (which is likely to act as a self-selecting mechanism - and could also provide an opportunity for the provision of English-language courses) than cultural problems. Canadians have difficulties with distance learning materials coming from the USA; there is enough experience now to know that one cannot just take British-based course materials and expect French or Germans to understand, appreciate or tolerate their ethnocentricity. Also, as Paul Bowen has noted, we must recognise that when we talk about 'Europe', we are not talking about a single, homogeneous market for our courses. There will be some markets, like the up-dating of professional electronic engineers, which may be relatively 'culture-free'. Other areas (and I am thinking here particularly of our Social Science and Education courses) are likely to be totally meaningless in most other European countries. However, many of these problems can be overcome by the joint development of materials deliberately designed for multi-national use.

Nor do we want to upset our fellow distance learning institutions by treading on their corns. We are more likely to benefit from their co-operation than from competing with them on their own territories. Nevertheless, fear of upsetting our neighbours seems to me to be the weakest of all the arguments against going into other European countries.

The argument against increased core activities in the rest of

Europe which seems to me to carry most weight with Open University decision-makers is the problem of providing adequate local support administrative services. The strategy being employed is to work with the other distance education institutions, in a variety of ways, so that they provide such support. The problem with this approach is its slowness, and its dependence on traditional models of local centres, local tutors, and correspondence tuition. It is worth noting that new models of support, based on new technologies, are rapidly emerging. Electronic communication now enables immediate and stored communications over long distances. If we do have a policy for Europe, it will need to consider innovative methods of registration, tutoring and counselling that are not so place and time-dependent, and which exploit the rapid technological developments in these areas. One only has to look across the channel to France's Minitel system to see how a technology can change the nature of student/tutor communications.

What must the OU do - or not do?

The last point seems to be an argument not so much for making existing courses available to a wider geographical market, as for developing new courses using new methods of delivery and support, designed specially for a wider European market, as well as including courses like DT200, and possibly T102, which already have a suitable technological base for European-wide initiatives.

For instance, PACE is designed specifically to meet a European-wide need. The Electronic University and the National Technological University in the United States now enable students anywhere on the North American continent to enrol. I

myself am planning to teach from Milton Keynes a specially designed 13 week course to 12 Masters students in the University of British Columbia, 7,000 miles away in Vancouver, (provided the OU gives me permission to be a part-time tutor!)

The essence of all these initiatives is that they are purposely designed to teach over long distances, using appropriate technology for specific target groups, and that each techological configuration is different. If we are to widen our activities in Europe, we need to adopt flexible course designs geared to specific target groups.

Co-operation also seems to be the name of the game. If we are to avoid the cultural traps, to keep down costs, and to provide necessary local support, we need to work with other agencies in Europe.

If that is the case, though, we need to improve both our own internal policy-making procedures regarding European initiatives, to improve our communications with other potential co-operators, and to speed up our joint decision-making. This will mean greater delegation, clearer objectives, and more money and encouragement for travel and communication within Europe. Comparing the speed with which action has been taken by staff at the Open University in co-operation with other organisations in response to EEC initiatives, with that taken by the University itself over its own European initiatives, it is clear that we need either to give far greater priority and urgency to European initiatives, or to keep out altogether. If we just dip our toes in the water, we are likely to catch a cold.